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Motivating Teachers to Principalship - Synopsis

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The aim of this presentation is to attain some more insight into the issues of empowerment and motivation in principalship in general, and in feminine leadership at schools in particular. It presents a case study of a woman-principal, who “bred” twelve principals during twelve years of principalship, most of them in her last five years on the job, in the middle of the 1990s. This case study is based on data collected during three years, during which I was deeply involved in her school as an organizational consultant. The principal investigated is part of a constantly growing majority of women-principals in Israel in the state-secular Jewish section. The analysis focuses, therefore, on the gender aspect of leadership and mentoring in education. Two questions are dealt with in this presentation: 1. How did the principal actually behave as a leader? 2. How did she act as a mentor of potential principals

The school, The Principal and the Staff

The study was conducted in a junior high school from the state secular Jewish section. The school comprises about 700 students and 60 teachers and is located in a middle-sized town in Israel. It belongs to the Ministry of Education and is supervised by the Ministry. Most of the students come from the higher and lower strata of the Israeli middle class, neither very rich, nor very poor.

Nira, the principal investigated, a woman over 50 years old, energetic and of younger appearance, has three grown up children, who have their own families. When I started the data collection, she was in her 8th year of principalship. She worked earlier as a high school history teacher, and fulfilled there various managerial functions.

Thirty teachers, half of the staff, were interviewed during the data collection process in the first half-year of my intervention as an organizational consultant in the school. All of them women, most of them aged between 30 to 60, mainly between 35 to 50 and having at least a 10-year experience. Three years after ending my intervention, I sent open questionnaires to the twelve teachers who turned to be principals, and asked them to explain their motivation for principalship. I also

conducted in-depth interviews with two of them, and another one with the principal herself.

The Main Findings:

Teachers' perceptions of their principal as a leader: "She is greater than life"

Teachers tended to be satisfied with, and proud of being members of that school led by Nira, and described it as an excellent and pleasant workplace. They perceived Nira as the creator of this atmosphere, and attributed it to her charisma and energy: "She is great", "She is something" "she is a bulldozer", "She is a crane". Those were the metaphors they often used for her.

They were aware that she demanded from herself what she demanded from others: "She is very devoted", "She spends endless hours at school", "When there arises a problem, she isn't at ease until she solves it". Teachers tended to agree that she was honest and decent: "You can rely on her", "She keeps her promises", and one said, like the pupils: "She is fair".

Nira as a mentor: "She is like a caring mother to us"

Nira was not only perceived as a strong leading figure, but also as a caring, empathic and supportive person: "You know you can count on her", "She is always there when a teacher is in trouble", "She is like a mother to us", "She is patient with new teachers, gives them support and help".

They acknowledged Nira's appreciation of and belief in them: "She always reminds us that she chose us, that we are the best teachers' lounge", "She told us she is proud to have us as her staff". In spite of being such an outstanding personality for them, she never raised herself above them: "She is like a friend", said one of them. The members of the leading team described her as collaborative, willing to listen, asked for their opinions, and took into account their reactions. They said they felt very close to her. The teachers tended to use the "we" language when they referred to projects and enterprises running at school. They said: "We won" or "It was difficult but we succeeded".

Nira as a public relations person: "She knew how to put the school on the map"

The teachers admired Nira's abilities to cope with the environment outside. They were aware that she succeeded in getting money and additional teaching hours for the school whenever they were needed. They knew she had good contacts with the mayor, with the head of the municipal department of education, and other members of

the municipality. They said: "The door is always open to her". She got along with the parents' representatives: "She knows how to handle them". Teachers were impressed by her contacts and her ability to allocate money, and saw it as one of the sources of her power. It enhanced their feeling of safety and security: "She knows the important people, and uses her contacts for the benefit of the school", said one of them.

Following are some sentences which represent the reflections of those who became principals on Nira as a mentor: "Nira was for me a model and an example"; "Her empowering and charismatic personality encouraged me"; "She evoked in me an internal drive to advance"; "I started believing in my own powers"; "She gave us the feeling of being an elite".

" I had the courage to lead my career thanks to Nira. I owe her my feeling of self-efficacy. I feel today that there is nothing I can't do. She taught me to always aspire to do things in the best possible way."

And Nira said:

"Firstly, I believed in being a model and an example of what I demanded from others. Secondly, I had total belief in my teachers. Thirdly, I tried to build the vision together with all of them".

Discussion

How did she behave as a leader?

Researchers like Fennel (1999) or Moos & Moller (2003) emphasize the tension between the demands of the external competitive, market-drive environment outside the school, and the need to build a culture of trust and caring inside the school. It is evident that Nira, the principal investigated, was able to cope with these contradictions. She was a charismatic, energetic, ambitious and courageous figure, but also an empathic and supportive friend. She performed her administrative and managerial tasks well, and at the same time, worked in collaboration with her teachers. Outside the school she was a calculated politician and public relations person. However, inside, she was a warm, caring mother, and created an atmosphere of trust and caring. She believed in her staff, gave the teachers opportunities to advance, and really helped them when they needed it.

Bearing in mind the theories on gender and leadership in education, it comes out that the principal described had an integrated approach. Her behavior was a combination of both feminine and masculine styles, and she was able to move flexibly from one style to the other as described by Regan & Brooks (1995).

How did she act as a mentor?

It seems that she served as a mentor by her being as well as by her doing. Her charismatic, energetic figure, her leading abilities, her aspiration for excellence, her being a person you could rely and depend on, all these turned her into a model and an example. The importance of a model for the growth of new principals is in line with arguments presented in the relevant literature (Gunter, 2001).

She had outstanding diagnostic abilities that helped her to identify teachers with leadership potential. She had an urge to motivate these people, as appears in her own words. Those teachers' advancement was for her a source of satisfaction, and she helped them in every way possible. She actively motivated them by expressing her belief in them, offering them roles, encouraging them to assume responsibility, and working in collaboration with them. These experiences gave them a taste of success and a feeling of self-efficacy. Nira's political contacts also helped these motivated teachers to become principals. The description of her behavior as a mentor is in accordance with the traits mentioned by Gibson (2004).

As a mentor, Nira was close to the Greek meaning of the word. She created a culture which encouraged teachers to think and act independently (Kay, in Crow & Matthews, 1998, p. 2). If we follow the journey metaphor offered by Crow & Matthews, (1998), it becomes evident that she was very successful as a mentor: Twelve teachers succeeded to generate their own "maps" and turned into twelve independent principals.

The findings show the importance of mentoring for women's career. Nira not only encouraged and supported her women-teachers, but made them aware of and acquainted with power structures. Understanding these structures is highly important as a lack of this understanding is considered as one of the obstacles in women's career (Hill & Regland, 1995).

The principal is the most influential person at school, a “fateful figure” (Sarason, 1982). Unfortunately, there tends to be a scarcity of good applicants for this role in the Western world, including Israel. Principals like Nira facilitate the solution of this problem.

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